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New Tack on Cases Against Israel?

By **STEPHEN ENGELBERG**

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WASHINGTON, July 10 — There was once a time when allegations that the Israeli Government had violated American law were handled with an eye to preserving the close relationship between the United States and Israel.

Suspensions of misconduct by Israel typically did not end up in front of grand juries but were resolved quietly through talks between diplomats.

Matters are somewhat different now. In the last year, the Israelis have been the subject of a series of well-publicized investigations involving allegations of espionage and illegal export of American technology.

At no time in the history of the state of Israel have the United States authorities been investigating more visibly embarrassing cases involving charges of crimes by the Israeli government or its representatives.

Senior Administration officials deny that this sudden spurt of cases reflects a change in policy toward Israel. Some observers contend, however, that the investigations are a sign that the White House has failed to maintain discipline over the Government's law-enforcement agencies. Pro-Israel lobbyists are privately asking whether mid-level officials in the Justice Department or United States Customs Service have been disclosing the investigations as part of an unauthorized vendetta against Israel.

Whatever the case, the relationship between Israel and the United States does appear to be moving in several different directions at once.

On Sunday, for instance, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral William J. Crowe Jr., was at the Israeli Embassy for a ceremony honoring the departing military attaché. Just a few days later, Administration officials disclosed that the Customs Service and the Justice Department were investigating a possible plan for illegally exporting equipment used in making cluster weapons.

In a statement that suggested a longing for the days when such cases were handled through diplomatic channels, the former Israeli chief of staff, Rafael Eitan, said, "If there was any substance to these allegations, the Americans could have ap-

proached us quietly and discreetly and clarified matters."

The Israelis were particularly angry that the case had been disclosed to the news media by unnamed officials before they were notified of its existence.

Another case involving the possible illegal export of technology for tank cannon barrels broke last December, and in that instance camera crews from "The NBC Evening News" accompanied the Customs Service agents as they executed search warrants in upstate New York.

Steven Green, who has written critically of the Israeli-American military relationship, said that he was finding increasing numbers of middle-level officials in Washington who were willing to discuss what they believe is a pattern of Israeli misconduct. "I find that people are more and more frequently willing to be cooperative to find informal channels to get the word out," Mr. Green said. "It's from a feeling of frustration."

Supporters of Israel contend that this willingness to disclose information about investigations of the Israelis springs largely from lower-level officials. At the highest levels, they

contend, the Reagan Administration remains a staunch supporter of Israel.

"There has never been a period with this much friendliness and trust," said Hymen Bookbinder, the Washington representative of the American Jewish Committee. "This is an unprecedented period of friendship and there are a few people who don't like this."

An official Israeli statement on Wednesday, however, suggested that the raising of the cluster weapon case caused "serious astonishments" that could "overcloud the good relations prevailing between the U.S. and Israel."

The most prominent of the cases related to Israel involved Jonathan Jay Pollard, the former Navy analyst who recently pleaded guilty to spying for Israel. Former Justice Department officials say they know of previous instances in which cases of Israeli spying in the United States were handled without criminal proceedings. But Mr. Pollard's behavior immediately before his arrest — a dash into the Israeli Embassy with F.B.I. agents trailing him — made it impossible to dispose of the incident quietly. Additionally, the Justice Department has taken a hard-line stand against all espionage, and was loathe to avert its eyes from Mr. Pollard just because he was working for the Israelis.

The situation worsened when Justice Department officials concluded they had been misled by the Israelis about the number of people involved in the case. "That whole thing left an extremely bad taste in people's mouths," said one official familiar with the case.

Mr. Pollard is now cooperating with the investigation and a grand jury in Washington, D.C., is continuing to investigate.

Customs officials and the Justice Department have been looking into allegations that American companies shipped technology for tank cannon barrels to Israel in violation of export laws. That case is still under investigation. Finally, a grand jury last year indicted a California businessman, Richard Kelly Smyth, on charges of illegally exporting to Israel 800 devices of the type used to trigger nuclear explosions.